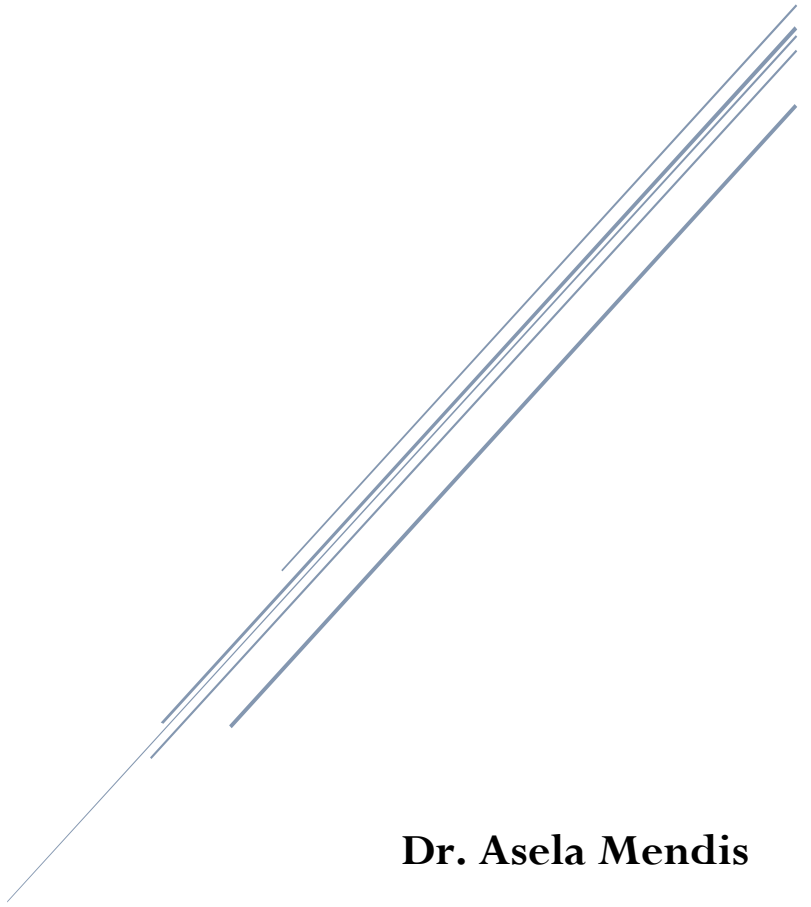


A GUIDE FOR WRITING REFLECTIVE NOTES



Dr. Asela Mendis

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“Just as no man lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies to itself. Every experience lives on in further experiences.” - John Dewey

“We do not learn so much from experience as we do from reflecting on our experience.”

– John Dewey

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current set up, in many postgraduate fields, candidates/trainees are required to prepare a portfolio as evidence of their training and career development. Assessment of portfolio is a very effective method of evaluating training, development of skills and attitudes etc. during the process of training. Reflective notes are an essential component in a portfolio as it shows how a trainee has perceived some experience and how she/he has analysed the issue in taking remedial action to improve his/her own practice and to avoid any mistakes in the future.

We reflect quite naturally in our day to day lives, thinking about things that have happened, why they happened, whether we handled them well. Therefore reflecting is

not an alien thing to most of us. It is a natural process which is important for our survival in the society.

In academia, you may be asked to formalise your reflections to show that learning is taking or has taken place. Therefore it is important to write or document your reflecting experience in a formal way to show that you have done it properly. Importantly when you write a reflective note to fulfil requirement of training it is necessary to think how you achieve the required target.

This instruction guide is written to help you in identifying topics suitable for reflect upon, structure your reflective notes in order to show your reflecting ability.

2. WHAT IS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?:

*'Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.
The important thing is not to stop questioning'*

- *Albert Einstein*

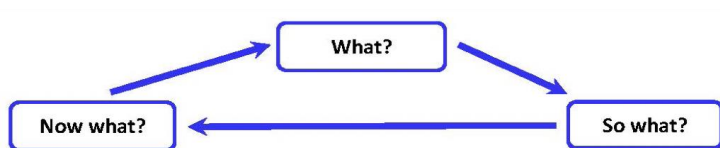
John Dewey (1993) recognised for the first time that an individual can reflect on things –particularly when there is a real problem or a sense of difficulty – by merely 'thinking' about

them. Dewey suggested three steps of reflection: (1) problem definition, (2) analysis, and (3)

generalisation. He emphasised the distinction between taking action based on reflection, as opposed to impulsive thinking.

Over the time many have worked on this principle of reflection, formulated different work or structural models. For your information three of such models are illustrated below.

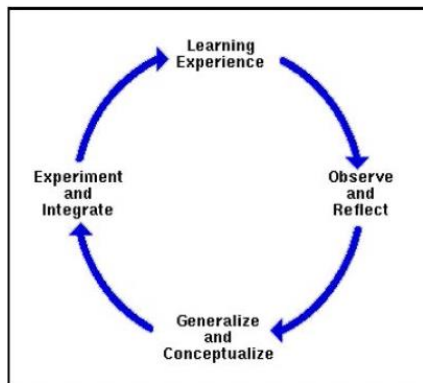
Reflection model offered by Driscoll (1994) has a simple 'what', 'so what' and 'now what' process, which enables us to look at the whole event. Although this is more recent opposed to the other two it is the simplest out of the three.



This is a very simple model but you can use it effectively in many of your reflection. However the other two models formulated by Kolb and Gibbs are more informative and easy to use.

David Kolb (1984) has described the 'experiential learning cycle' where he offers four phases of learning process. In the first phase, the learner has a specific experience of learning. In the second phase, the learner observes and reflects on the experience of learning and also responds to it. In the third phase, observations are

related to other concepts in the learner's past experience and knowledge. In the fourth phase, the learner figures out the implications for action that can be tested in and applied to different situations.



In this model phase two is the most important one which has a direct bearing on reflective practice. In other words one cannot proceed with reflective practice without getting himself/herself involved with the second phase.

The third one is a reflection model developed by Gibbs (1988) can be useful to reflect on something unexpected that happened in the classroom, when something went wrong (or perhaps extraordinarily well) in the classroom that we did not anticipate. Gibb's model is as follows:



All these three models if practiced properly will result in increased self-awareness, change of behaviour, and the acquisition of new skills.

2.1 Why reflect?

According to Gibbs it is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. One has to develop the ability to reflect upon his/her experience. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. This means it is always better and proper to reflect upon a recent experience. Main idea behind reflection is to analyse the situation and be ready with an action plan to deal with the next similar experience. Delaying the reflection might result in a situation where you face the second similar situation before being able to prepare for it and you might perform even worse than the previous event.

It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. Generalisation will allow new situations to be tackled effectively.' (Gibbs 1988)

3. REFLECTIVE WRITING

Reflection can increase a student's awareness of the learning value they received from an experience. Writing can help increase the chance that a student's learning is not limited to the past, but rather the experience has value for the student's future. Developing the ability to write a good reflective note will also help you in structuring your answers for essay or structured essay type question in examinations you face in the future.

To reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences.

Reflection is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind.

3.1 WHAT IS REFLECTIVE WRITING?

Reflection is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2012) as "The action or process of thinking carefully or deeply about a particular subject, typically involving influence from one's past life and experiences."

Reflection is a way of enabling self-development and deeper learning by looking back at an experience so as to learn from it and then move forward. A person may discuss learning from an experience; reflective writing takes this a stage further by putting the reflection into the more permanent and structured format of a written account and linking it to academic theory.

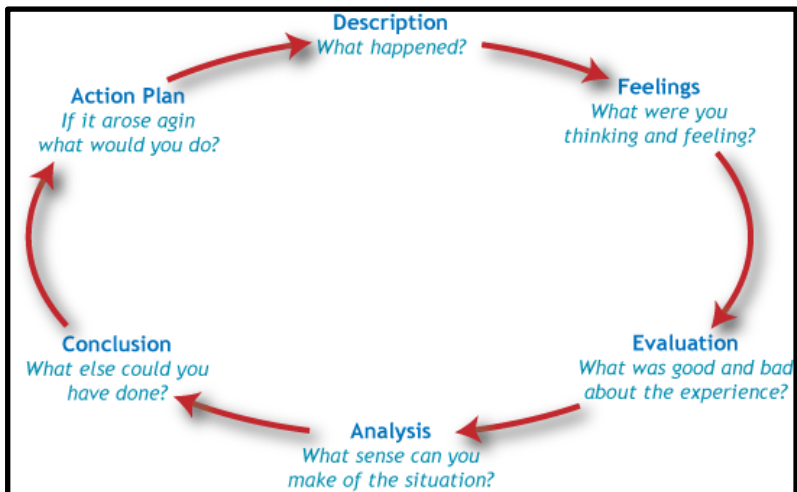
3.2 Reflective Writing:

- Provides a way by which you can make best use of an experience (turning surface learning into deep learning)
- Can be used to record your progress throughout your study at University or elsewhere.
- Can improve your performance by using the outcome of reflection to inform future practice.
- Is a means of learning by making links between theory and your practice
- Is a skill which can continue to help you develop professionally after leaving University

Reflective writing can help you to improve your analytical skills because it requires you to express what you think, and more significantly, how and why you think that way. In addition, reflective analysis asks you to acknowledge that your thoughts are shaped by your assumptions and preconceived ideas; in doing so, you can appreciate the ideas of others, notice how their assumptions and preconceived ideas may have shaped their thoughts, and

perhaps recognize how your ideas support or oppose what you read.

The purpose of reflective writing is to interrogate your own learning and demonstrate the ability to apply theory or conceptual processes to your practice or task in a meaningful way. Whether you're training to be a health specialist, a lawyer, a scientist, a business person, an engineer, a teacher, a historian or any other professional, you will be expected to be a reflective practitioner. This means questioning your everyday practice and implementing new knowledge gained through this reflection in your job/research/study.



Gibbs' model of reflection, from Gibbs, G. (1988). Learning by Doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods. Oxford: Further Education Unit.

GIBBS' MODEL OF THE REFLECTIVE CYCLE:

TYPES OF REFLECTIVE WRITING:

Reflection-in-action and Reflection-on-action

Two main types of reflection are often referred to – reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The most obvious difference is in terms of when they happen.

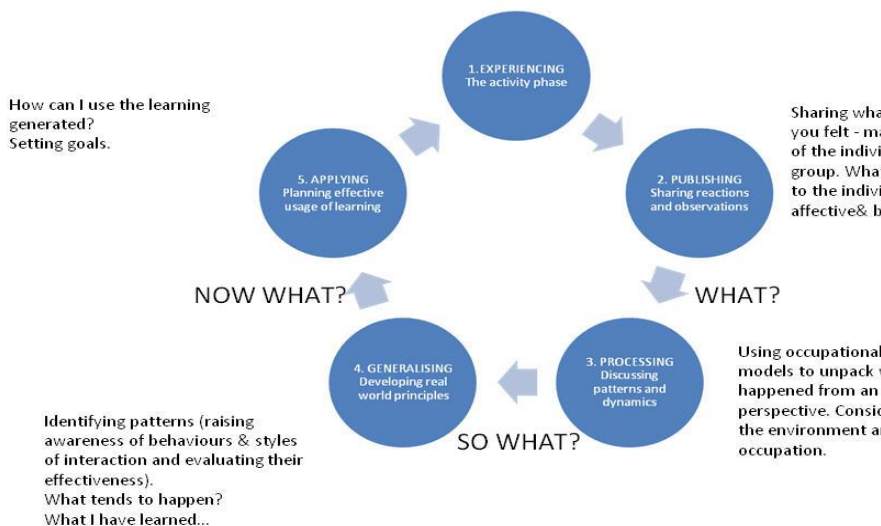
Reflection-in-action

This is the reflection that takes place whilst you are involved in the situation, often a patient interaction. Reflection-in-action involves using analysis of observation, listening and/or touch or 'feel' to problem solve. It therefore sounds a lot like clinical reasoning – where reflection differs is that the problem solving leads to a change in the practitioner's view of self, values and beliefs. It is like 'thinking on your feet' but the focus is on gaining a new perspective, rather than just solving the problem. Because it is happening on the spot, this type of reflection often appears very intuitive. It can take some time to develop the skills of reflection-in-action – it often is a skill associated with the development of expert practice.

Reflection-on-action

This type of reflection involves a stepping back from the situation, meaning that it happens at some time after the situation has occurred. Therefore it demands a time commitment – something that is often a challenge. Despite this, it has an important place in professional development.

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY



Adapted from: Pfeiffer, J.W. & Ballow, A.C. (1988). Using structured experiential learning for professional development. (UATT Series, Vol. 1) San Diego, CA: University Associates

LEVELS OF REFLECTION:

There are three levels of reflection; superficial, medium and deep. For postgraduate level **superficial reflection** is not very useful. Reflection at this level is very basic – some would say it is not reflection at all, as it is largely descriptive!

It should be the medium or deep level that should be used to write reflective notes at the post graduate levels.

Medium level - at this level of reflection, the person takes a step back from what has happened and starts to explore thoughts, feelings, assumptions and gaps in knowledge as part of the problem solving process. The reflector makes sense of what has been learnt from the experience and what future action might need to take place.

Deep level - This level of reflection has the most depth. This level of reflection shows that the experience has created a change in the person – his/her views of self, relationships, community of practice, society and so on. To do so, the writer needs to be aware of the relevance of multiple perspectives from contexts beyond the chosen incident – and how the learning from the chosen incident will impact on other situations.

It is better to reflect at the deepest level in your postgraduate writings.

STRUCTURING THE REFLECTIVE NOTE:

There is no one accepted structure for a reflective note. It is an individual effort and the basis is to include all main areas of the Gibb's reflective cycle in the note. It is even

Reflective thinking – especially if done in discussion with others – can be very 'free' and unstructured and still be very useful. Even reflective writing can be unstructured, for example when it is done in a personal diary. However when it is done for a portfolio or training purpose it is always better to write according to a structure. Sub topics in the structure could vary and named according to the individual preference.

Tips for a good reflective report:

- 1. Good notes:**
- 2. Topic**
- 3. Literature**
- 4. Plan**
- 5. Go deep**
- 6. Emotions**
- 7. Journey**
- 8. Style**

FEATURES OF REFLECTIVE WRITING

Describing what happened and how you felt is only a small part of reflective writing. The emphasis as you write should be on your analysis and exploration of the experience. Reflective writing differs from most academic writing in that you will use the first person ("I") to describe the experience and your feelings. Most reflective writing for assignments will also include an academic element so you should write in the first person ("I felt...") for your own account and in the third person ("Jones (2010) suggests that ...") for the theory.

Use the past tense when writing about what happened and how you felt as you are looking back on the experience (e.g. "I felt..."), but when referring to any academic theory, use the present tense as these ideas are still current (e.g. "Jones argues that...").

As in academic writing, reflective writing requires the use of formal language, arguments supported by evidence, and fully referenced information resources.

Reflective writing looks to the future. You need to show how your reflection on what happened in the past will inform your future practice.

Your analysis of the experience should be linked to academic theory in order to give it credibility.

How to Write a Good Reflective Report

Be critical. Although the content of a reflective portfolio will be more personalised than other assignments, you should use the same level of critical analysis as you do for any essay or exam.

Be thorough. Make sure that you write about all the stages of your project, from the planning phases through to completion. You also need to include a comprehensive post-project analysis.

Don't be afraid to state what went wrong! Writing about the least successful aspects of your project allows you to demonstrate a capacity for true critical analysis. It also lets examiners see that you are self-aware and capable of independent professional development.

Don't be afraid to state what went right! Some students find it difficult to write confidently about the most successful parts of their work. Scholars are normally expected to be highly objective, and they are often discouraged from celebrating individual achievement or personal contributions. However, in the Reflective Report you should be sure to state clearly and concisely how your own actions contributed to a successful outcome.

Mistakes to Avoid in Writing Reflective Reports

The most common mistake in Reflective Writing is to be either too objective and scholarly, or too emotional and

non-critical. Either mistake is equally wrong. Students should aim for a middle ground in their writing, in which they highlight their own personal feelings and reflections but analyse these with reference to theoretical course material.

Avoid blaming others for things that went wrong. Try to maintain some level of objectivity with regard to both failures and successes. To avoid being overly personal, emphasise the way that theories from your field could address any weaknesses that you encountered.

Finally, be professional. It is true that Reflective Reports require a less formal style of writing, but students sometimes believe that this allows for illegible handwriting and poor grammar. Remember that this is still an academic assignment, and all the normal standards of presentation apply!

GETTING STARTED WITH REFLECTIVE WRITING

As with all essays you should begin by examining the question and identifying any direction words. This will help you to determine the main event or experience you

need to reflect upon, and how you should approach it in relation to your studies. You should structure your essay clearly with an introduction, a main body and a conclusion.

Introduction:

In your introduction you should set the scene for your essay. This will involve providing a description of the event – who, what, when, where and why it happened. You should also note down the main issues you have identified, and provide a brief explanation of how they will be addressed throughout your essay.

Main body:

The main body of your essay should be made up of a few paragraphs. Each paragraph should address one key issue, and it is a good idea to use the stages of reflective thinking as the basis for your structure:

- Describe the issues identified
- Discuss your feelings about it. Was it good or bad?
- Assess how it affects your understanding or practice and how it can be linked to your learning
- Explain how it will affect your actions

As with all of your other college assignments, you should make sure that you link each paragraph to the next. This will help to ensure your essay has a coherent structure.

Conclusion

Your conclusion should draw together all of the main points covered in your essay. You should aim to explicitly answer any questions which have been raised by linking directly back to the title of the essay. Try to summarise the most significant things you have learnt from the process. It is important to end by summarising any actions you will take to improve upon your future knowledge and practice. For more information on essay writing please pick up a copy of our Writing guide.

Description – What happened? Who was there?

Interpretation/analysis - What did I feel? Why did I respond in the way I did? What are the most important/relevant aspects?

How does it link to theory? What went well/what didn't? Outcome/evaluation - What have I learned? What would I change?

STYLE AND GRAMMAR:

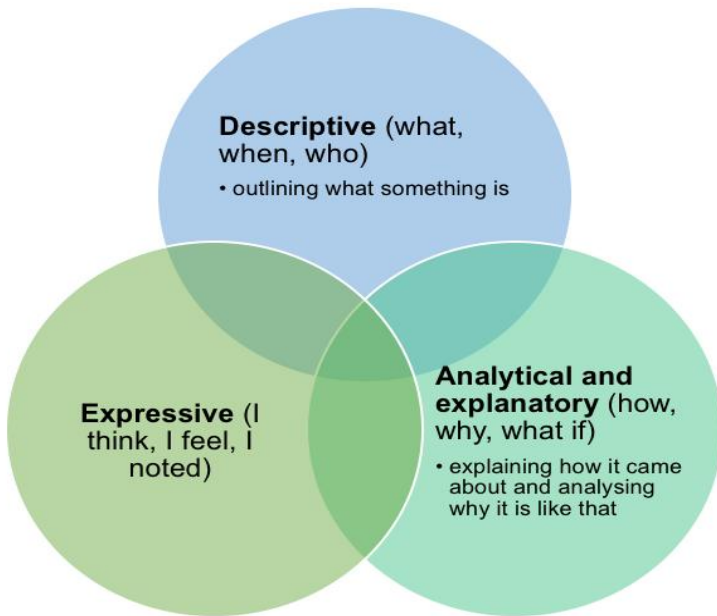
Academic writing tasks usually require you to support your main points with references to literature and take an objective perspective largely without personal 'I' or 'me' references. Reflective writing, by contrast, involves

recording your views, reactions, impressions or observations, using 'I' and other personal pronouns.

HOW MUCH GUIDANCE YOU NEED?

Too much direction from the teacher may lead the students to writing what he or she thinks the teacher wants to hear.

Too little direction from the teacher may yield a series of short, writings that state "I did this and this and this." The writer's emphasis becomes a reporting of what the student did without valuable comments about what the student actually "learned and will be able to do in the future because of this experience".



1 Description What happened? 2 Feelings How did you feel about this experience? 3 Evaluation What was positive/negative about the experience? 4 Analysis What sense can be made of the experience? 5 Conclusion What else could have also been done? 6 Action plan What would you do differently in the future?